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Visser, Sanne Siete; Kreemers, Diana

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Breaking through boundaries with PAR – or not? A research project on the facilitation of participatory governance through participatory action research (PAR)

Sanne Siete Visser[a] and Diana Kreemers[b]

[a]Department of Cultural Geography, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands; [b]School of the Arts and Media, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

In this paper, two researchers reflect on the institutional space for participatory governance in a participatory action research (PAR) process that was initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (ECS) in the Netherlands. It was implemented in two schools by researchers contracted by the ministry. The project's aim was to explore possibilities for involving schools in policy processes using PAR. We conclude that PAR sheds light on the communication strategies, power and authority balances, and meaning of participation among the participants. The attempt to break through traditional hierarchies generated new insights into the institutional space at both the participating schools and the government institutions that can be used to create participatory approaches to governance. The researchers were the bridging actors between the schools and the government institutions. While previous research showed that a bridging actor can play a positive role as an objective party who is able to deliberate between the participants, we found that it impeded the creation of a participatory governance space.

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, researchers and policymakers have looked for ways to involve educational practitioners in research and (local) policy development. Before these efforts began, schools were often required to implement new educational programmes without prior consultation, based on the assumption that these programmes would stimulate the professional development of schools, and would help teachers and pupils (Sagor 2008). Because of the lack of consultation, teachers and other education professionals felt that these initiatives interfered with their work, and that policymakers were not treating them as professionals. Aiming to get the teachers more involved in the development of new school programmes, and in policymaking in general the Participatory Action Research (PAR) process was introduced (Ponte 2005; Sagor 2000, 2008; Ho 2002). According to Hawkins (2015), the PAR process should create conditions that contribute to exploring new possibilities and transformative outcomes, and prompt self-reflection

CONTACT Sanne Siete Visser s.s.visser@rug.nl

among the practitioners who seek to improve the educational setting. Earlier participatory research on schools in Europe showed that when schools are encouraged to independently direct their development and to be intrinsically innovative, they are more likely to embrace future innovations and adapt them to their own unique teaching environment (Grundy 1994; Hughes 2003). In a PAR process, schools often work on structural goals, such as encouraging reflection among teachers, developing school-wide priorities, and building professional cultures (Sagor 2000; Koutselini 2008). Since the introduction, a number of scholars have argued that the use of the PAR approach is essential to the professional development of teachers and others involved in the educational process (Sagor 2008).

In recent years, (local) governments have also shown an interest in involving local groups, professional organisations, and individual citizens in the development of new forms of governance (Fischer 2006; Reddel and Woolcock 2004). Discussions on 'participating societies' made the use of the PAR model more relevant for governmental institutions (Cornwall 2004; Cornish and Dunn 2009). This process supports the liberalisation of policy agendas, and the development of a public orientation among citizens (Baiocchi 2003; Wampler 2012; Fung and Wright 2001). Although governments have become more open to the idea of participatory governance, these institutions often neglect to design their laws and regulations to support participatory initiatives. Gaventa (2004) showed that for new forms of governance to work, all parties should be aware of their locus of control, their level of inclusion, their role in decision-making, and their responsibilities. When the preconditions for involvement in participatory governance are not clear, such a process will not do much more than open up a space in which powerful actors will remain dominant. It has also been noted that PAR projects that lead to more participatory governance tend to work with the organisations that are already in place, or the 'usual suspects' (Bassel & Emejulu, 2010).

In this paper, we analyse a PAR process in which education professionals were provided space to develop their own research and policy agenda, and to interact with national policymakers to create participatory governance. Efforts to reconcile the needs and concerns of local stakeholders with the national policymaking agenda are new (Secco, Pettenella, and Gatto 2011; Wallin, Carlsson, and Hansen 2016). In their article on the process of collaborative inquiry between teachers, researchers, and policymakers, Tan and Atencio (2016) observed that adding policymakers to the evaluative process within PAR was a positive contribution.

In our study, we went beyond these previous approaches by attempting to facilitate a space for participatory governance for policymakers and practitioners. In this paper, we provide insights into the experiences of the researchers and local actors in this process.

Project initiative

In the Netherlands, the Public Communication Service (PCS) of the Ministry of General Affairs seeks to inspire policymakers and ministries to develop new approaches to researching society as part of its Innovation Agenda. In 2015, PCS collected ideas and proposals from various ministries to start a participatory research pilot programme. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (ECS)

stated that they see schools as learning organisations that can study, express, and organise their own needs. ECS's focal point was to work collectively on initiatives to improve interactions between the ministry and the schools. The decentralised Dutch educational system leaves many decisions about personnel management and finances to local school boards. However, the national government recently regained influence over the educational system (Verbiest 2014). The introduction of school attainment targets and a strong emphasis on school revenues, which are reviewed in school inspections, are indications that the schools are now closely monitored. Officials at ECS have, however, indicated that they would like to interact more with the practitioners in the schools, and that they are interested in exploring how PAR could facilitate interaction and co-creation at policy level.

Participatory governance

Somekh and Zeichner (2009) argue that PAR is designed to challenge traditions and break through existing hierarchies. PAR can uncover the 'ugly truths' of existing hierarchies and reveal the willingness of partners to break through these entrenched systems (Etmanski and Pant 2007; Kemmis 2006). The link between this process and policymaking is very important, because PAR can engage stakeholders on several levels to ensure that policies and programmes are framed and implemented in ways that suit the specific context. Simultaneously, parties can explore more creative ways to bring policy and practice together (Kemmis 2006). Whether a PAR process can break through hierarchies depends on the institutional space of the participating organisations.

Institutional space for participatory governance

Participation is often dependent on the institutional space to actually effect change (Bassel and Emejulu, 2010). In 2006 Fung introduced the 'democracy cube' (Figure 1) that focuses on the public participation of citizens. We operationalised the cube to visualise the achievements of PAR in this process of involving schools in policy processes and to evaluate the institutional space. In this paper, we reflect on the institutional space in the participatory process on three levels, as described in Fung's democracy cube (2006): (1) the level of the participants; (2) the level of communication and decision-making in the participatory process; and (3) the level of authority and power in the participatory process. We also evaluate the meaning of participation (discourse).

1. Participants

The inclusion of multiple parties or participants in discussions on policymaking encourages everyone to contribute expertise from their respective fields. Policymakers therefore find it increasingly important to include members from different fields in the process, and to carefully consider whether all perspectives are represented (Oteman, Wiering, and Helderman 2014). However, studies that have looked at how this process works in practice found that the initial idea of inclusiveness can be difficult to implement, as the initiating institution determines what kind of proposals are acceptable in the institutional space (Fischer 2016). Previous research that examined these issues shows that not all potential participants are willing to step up in a process of participatory governance (Michels and De Graaf 2017; Fung 2006). Thus, when weighing the value of participation in the institutional space, the following questions should be addressed:

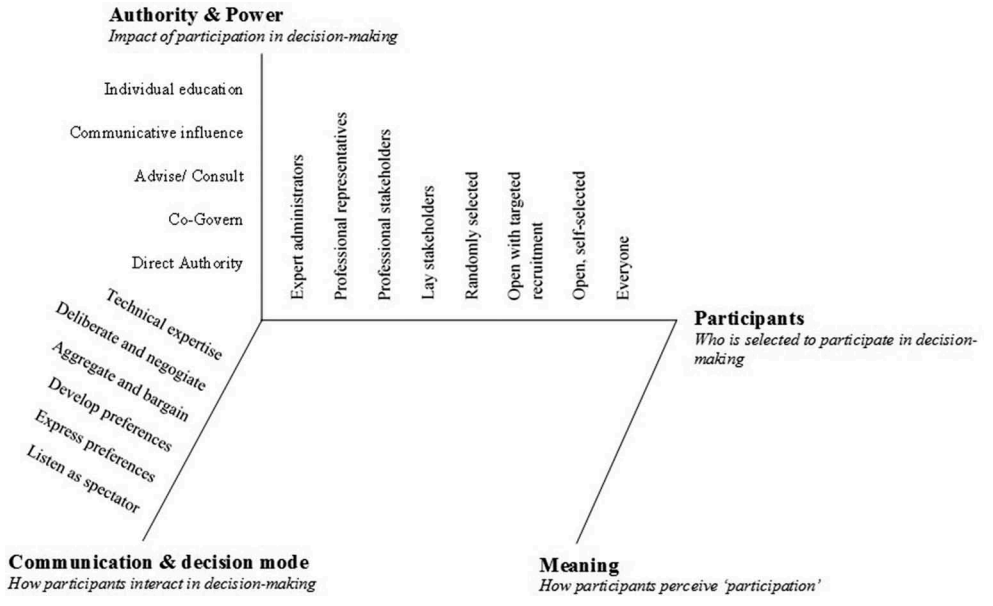

Figure 1. Democracy Cube (adapted from Fung 2006).

Who participates and what was the process of inclusion? Is everyone is motivated to be involved in the institutional space, and does everyone want to have the opportunity to be heard? And: can everybody be responsive?

2. Communication and decision-making

In the democracy cube, Fung (2006) identified several forms of communication within the participatory space. The communication and decision-making levels range from listening as a spectator (and not being involved in communication and decision-making) to sharing technical expertise that influences the communication and decision-making. Research has shown that in a large institutional space, the local context and local practices are more likely to be taken into account; and policy development processes are clearer (Fung 2006; Reddel and Woolcock 2004). Governments should learn how their discourses align with the language of local communities and other, more decentralised government institutions (Oteman, Wiering, and Helderman 2014). It is important to consider the means through which people are allowed to participate in decision-making too. These means can be listening, negotiating or bargaining. In this paper, we reflect on the communication strategies of the participants, how they communicate together and the intensity of their influence on decision-making within the institutional space.

3. Authority and power

Fung (2006) explained that a third dimension in the institutional space consists of the modes of impact that participants can have in public policy. Institutional spaces are never neutral, as they are influenced by power relations (Gaventa 2004). The people who create space in which influence and power can be exercised also determine the levels of power of the participants within that space. Three forms of power can be distinguished: visible, hidden, and invisible (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002). Visible power is the power that is visibly laid down in formal rules, structures, and procedures for making decisions.

Hidden power is exercised by the most powerful people in a situation, who can unofficially bend rules and set an agenda. Invisible power influences a situation through the norms and values of the power holders. The expectations of all parties about the eventual impact should be made clear to prevent disappointment about the achievement of concrete actions. The output of a situation in which people exercise power can range from communicative influence to a co-governance output or direct authority. In this paper, we reflect on the power the participants are willing to take and the power they are given in the PAR process and how arising discussions link with policy action.

4. Meanings (discourse)

Fischer (2006) added an important element for understanding institutional space: the sociocultural practices that create the discourse. The *democracy cube* does not include a layer of meaning-giving on participation. Still, the meaning people give to their participation helps to explain their reasons for involvement in participatory governance. In addition to understanding the structures of institutional space, we need to learn about the actors and the institutions identities, and get to know their practices (Bush 1987). The interplay between these identities will create the social space, which can affect the micro cultures of the different parties (Alexiadou and van de Bunt-Kokhuis. 2013). How school participants are framed by policymakers, and vice versa, will affect the contributions to and the outcomes of the participatory governance process. In this paper, we reflect on how participation is understood, and how it affected the outcomes of the process of participatory governance.

Methods

The project the Ministry of ECS initiated was executed at two schools (one primary school and one secondary school), which were asked to participate by network partners of the ministry. The primary school, which was located in a rural setting in the north of The Netherlands, had approximately 100 pupils and a team of 12 teachers, a school director, and a janitor. The secondary school, which was located in a highly urban setting, had approximately 800 students and a team of 50 teachers and assisting personnel. At the project start, the schools and ministries were asked to develop their own problem statement and research questions to work on during the PAR process.

The primary school focused their research on the continuous learning objectives for children ages 0–12. Specifically, they looked at the learning lines from day care and kindergarten programmes – both of which were based in the school building – to the sixth grade of primary school. The secondary school selected the topic of exam culture, and formulated the following research question: *Why and how do we examine the students, and does this method of examination play a role in the work culture?*

The ministries research goals were, 1) gaining insights into which themes were related to quality of education in the current educational school systems. These themes could inform the focus points for current policy discussions, or bring new topics to policymakers' attention. The second research goal was to explore how PAR could contribute to breaking through internal hierarchies, as well as the hierarchies that separate the educational practice field from the educational policy field. The ministry's primary intentions were to hear more from educational professionals in schools (instead of just the 'rebellious few' they more often hear of), and to let them create a process of development and change

within the school – and, possibly, to allow the process to serve as a starting point for more participatory governance on the national level. Therefore, ministries were interested in organizing a PAR-process in which there was no predetermined question and no involvement of the ministry per se. In this paper, we will mainly focus on the second goal, as it is more relevant to the reflective character of this paper. The use of PAR was an important means of creating more space for voices from the educational field to be heard.

The researchers were responsible for the facilitation of the PAR process within the schools and the interactions between the ministries and the schools. They distinguished six learning cycles, which were performed at the schools with all participating actors:

(1) Identifying a research theme, problem statement, and research questions;
(2) Conducting a situational analysis in the daily environment. This analysis informed the researchers on the school staff's perceptions on the chosen topic and on concerns and action points on the topic of choice. It also highlighted the general communication structures and power relations within the schools and the perceptions on influence on policy processes on national level;
(3) Discussing the situational analysis with the relevant actors;
(4) Formulating an action plan within the schools, and determining the end goals and the people who should be involved;
(5) Implementing the actions, the process of which was documented by the researchers;
(6) Having the researchers and the school teams evaluate the action points/interventions.

The researchers organised monthly meetings with the representatives[1] of the two ministries to involve them in the research development and to reflect on the findings from the research process in the schools. The representatives of the ministries were three policymakers from the PCS of the Ministry of General Affairs, two policymakers from the policy department that were assigned with policies for primary and secondary education and one communication advisor from the Ministry of ECS.

The discussions that arose during the research process were noted in journal entries of the researchers, in notes of the monthly meetings with the policymakers, and in notes from conversations with the teachers and other personnel from the schools that were participating in the study.

After the research project was completed, the researchers reflected on the research process and the deliberating power of PAR as a research method in the governmental context. To perform this assessment, we used the concepts of participatory governance and institutional space, as described above.

Results

In the results section, we use the democracy cube (Fung 2006) to frame the level of participatory governance between the schools and the ministries. Additionally, we explore meanings (discourse) of participation in the participatory process.

Participants

First, we focus on who were involved in the PAR process. We then look at how the selection of participants influenced the process of participatory governance.

The first step was to determine what challenges the schools would like to discuss and study. In both schools, the question of who would participate in determining these challenges highlighted the lines of internal hierarchy. At the primary school, the management asked the teachers to come up with their current challenges. After the selection process, both the management team and the teachers invited the kindergarten teachers and the day care management and employees to join the research process as professional stakeholders who would study the topic in their school. The children at the school and the parental committee were invited to think about the research topic too. This process was overseen by management, as the teachers focused more on the daily routines in their classrooms, and either could not or did not want to think about who should be involved in the research process. A primary school teacher commented:

> *Some say we are a fanatic school, the director takes on many challenges, and she encourages development. This project is another one. It is nice we are given space to think about what we would like to do within this theme, although not everyone can put in or puts in the same time and energy.*

Still, the decision about who to involve as participants was mainly made by the school's management teams of the school and the day care. As the research progressed, the teachers became more aware of the importance of the other stakeholders, and encouraged direct cooperation between the teachers, the day care professionals, and the parents. At the secondary school, the question of who would participate recurred throughout the research process. While the primary school could create a stimulus for parties to participate in the research process early on, and were able to gather opinions and information from these parties; at the secondary school, the school team was larger, and the school maintained multiple levels of management. The research topic was selected in dialogue with a small group of teachers and the management team. The parental committee was involved to approve the chosen theme and to communicate it to other parents. The hierarchy in the school was directional for the participation at this school. Members of the management team were involved in every step of the process; the teachers and the other educational personnel were involved in some parts of the process (such as in setting the final research question and thinking about important actions to create change in the exam culture). Many decisions were made by teachers that also fulfilled mid-level management tasks. Team leaders were overrepresented as participants, in the in-depth interviews, and in the planned discussions. Students were involved in reflecting on the research topics but were less involved in the other learning cycles.

The participant's involvement depended on the level of communication and power within the organisation. At the primary school, the communication lines were shorter, and the overall participation level was high. At the secondary school, by contrast, the researchers had to ask at every step in the process who would participate in the next step and who had informed the teachers of the latest developments.

Overall, the professional stakeholders (educational staff) as well as the lay stakeholders involved in this process (parents, villagers) acknowledged that they preferred to discuss their next steps with the school management, and did not always feel they had the expertise to intervene in educational development independently. Still, the schools encouraged them to think about their inclusiveness in the PAR process, and thus created space for participatory governance.

The ministries deliberately distanced themselves from the process within the schools, giving the schools the freedom to choose their challenges, and to determine who should be involved in addressing the challenges they set themselves. The ministries did not take on an active role until the end of the research cycle, when they organised a conference to talk about participatory research and participatory governance with the policymakers and the schools. The reason to not participate early on, was because they wanted the schools to autonomously explore their chosen topics. In this final meeting, the ministries tried to create an inclusive space to talk about educational policy and practice, where they deliberately aimed to discuss the schools' topics with the education professionals as equal professional stakeholders.

The role of the researchers

In the first stages of the project, the researchers were mainly observing the communication and interactions between the schools and the ministries. Upon reflection, we believe we should have taken a more active role in engaging members of the ministry as participants in the research process. In the later stages, it became increasingly clear that the limited involvement of the policymakers had largely influenced the division of roles throughout the process. A discussion involving participants from both schools and the ministries about the hierarchical lines between the ministries and the schools did not take place until the final event. The process would have more been inclusive if all parties had been equally involved in effort and interparticipant communication. An important imbalance that occured was that the number of participants within the schools grew through a snowball effect of participation, while the group of participating policymakers stayed the same. It was not until the preparations were being made for the final event that more policymakers were asked to participate by the policymakers who were already participating.

Communication and decision-making in the participatory process

The management staff of both schools were challenged to create more participatory governance in communication and decision-making, and to involve the expertise of their teams in the PAR process. The primary school's management staff was very pleased to increase the level of participation of the school personnel, the day care personnel, and the children and their parents. They wanted all stakeholders to communicate their preferences and to share their technical expertise. However, they were challenged by the limited initiative by the school personnel in the early research stages. In the secondary school, the management staff were challenged by the participatory governance process itself, as their predominantly directive communication style had to become more inclusive. The management as well as the teachers had to change their roles to create a deliberating and negotiating space in which teachers and other educational personnel could have more voice in the decision-making process.

All participants, regardless of their years of experience or the grade they taught, were invited to share their concerns and to deliberate about actions and solutions, which boosted participation in decision-making. In both schools, the teachers and the other school professionals had communicated on the subject of study with each other based on their technical expertise in the school process. This resulted in a more inclusive pattern of daily communication, and had an impact on the level of participatory governance. A primary school teacher commented on the process of interaction with the day care:

> *We share our vision on the child, but we have to handle children differently. Firstly, because at school they have to learn things and secondly, because the number of children is different. However, it was very nice* [to interact with the day care employees]. *I recommended them to create a corner set up as a house. Children from first-grade love that. Then they will recognize things when they go from the daycare to school.*

The ministries were listening as spectators and could not share technical expertise on the policy process. At the same time, the schools were expressing and developing preferences and displaying technical expertise, but were not provided the space for actual interactions on these preferences and strategies to allow for deliberation and negotiation with the policymakers throughout the project.

The role of the researchers

The researchers focused on the PAR process with the goal of achieving a circular process of disclosing and analysing the challenges and of achieving change through action. In the communication and decision-making processes, they empowered the school staff to share their concerns about the challenges they faced and to offer input on the actions that should be taken to solve these problems. This fostered the emergence of a creative process of governance within the schools. The researchers did not, however, organise (enough) occasions on which participants from both the ministries and the schools could deliberate with each other, which could have increased the use of other communication modes, such as deliberating and negotiating, or the technical expertise of both parties to influence policymaking. The potential of PAR to open up opportunities for direct communication between the ministries and the schools, without the researchers serving as messengers, was underutilized. This limited the improvement of mutual understanding among the participants of each other's expertise, and of how they can influence each other. In retrospective, a more proactive role from the researchers in the process of organizing the governance space may be beneficial for participatory governance.

Authority and power in the participatory process

As we described above, participants in a PAR process to support participatory governance should feel that they have the space to provide input and take power, but also that they have the confidence needed to exercise that power. In this space, three forms of power can be distinguished: visible, hidden, and invisible (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002). In both schools, most power had historically been with the school management. The formal, rule-based power structure was not instantly changed with PAR, but certain aspects of governance shifted other professionals in the schools. They were given the

space to co-govern on the rules surrounding the research challenges. The power was shared with the (lay and professional) adults in the project, and not to the children and teenagers, who were involved in the advising and consulting aspects of the PAR process.

Both the visible and the invisible forms of power were held by the professional stakeholders. The invisible power was noticeable through the hierarchical structures, which continued to uphold the usual norms and values for matters outside of the topics addressed in the PAR process. The hidden power to set an agenda mostly came from the ministries. Although not visible as participants at the schools, they still had power in the schools' topic selection. Both schools were working on challenges they considered interesting for the ministry, and on challenges that were raised by the school inspection in previous audits. In addition, both schools considered and worked on a topic that would be relevant for other schools as well. From field notes of the researchers: *Both schools want to commit to widely acknowledged themes. A comment from the primary school:*

> *'Other schools won't relate to a theme such as population decline, so we should look for another theme'.*

At the secondary school the power and voice of the ministry was literally reflected on in the introduction meeting, in which policymakers and researchers visited the school for the first time. For example, the director responded to the request of this research in the following manner:

> *We do not know whether your* [ministries'] *questions are our questions.*

At a later stage a teacher explained the motivations for the chosen theme, which shows that the role of the policymakers is reflected in the theme:

> *The theme 'exam culture' is a highly interesting topic because it gives insights into the limitations of the policies of the ministry and the policymakers. Schools have to follow certain end criteria set up by the ministry, but these are not always right for every student. How do you deal with that?*

The involved policymakers did value the topics chosen by the schools and recognised the relevance for the policy fields and valued potential insights that could be gained with the PAR approach.

The role of the researchers

At the schools, the researchers gave themselves some visible power and authority to study and collect data on current challenges in the schools, apart from the topics the schools chose to study in depth. They were *given* visible power to guide the process and to observe the educational processes and recurring themes in the discussions in the school in order to provide the schools and the ministries with their impressions of the challenges the schools were addressing. The researchers had the power to advise and consult with all stakeholders, and the schools had communicative influence through the voice of the researcher, who deliberated with the policymakers throughout the project. However, the schools could not achieve a level of co-governance with the policymakers themselves. In terms of the institutional space, the schools had no real expectations of exercising influence on the policy level and the ministries were not clear about the level

of influence they would give the schools. Still, the hope of influencing policy grew among the schools as the project progressed. The school participants indicated that they believed they had started to exert some influence at the final meeting at the ministry. From the field notes of the final meeting:

> *Marianne indicates that it was a very valuable experience to have her voice heard in this environment* [physically situated at the ministry]. *Rick had heated discussions with some policymakers. They felt that they could contribute to the way policymakers think about the policy content as well as on the process of policymaking. It became clear to them that there was a disconnection between the ministry and the work floor, about the sense and nonsense of certain policy changes.*

At the meeting the bridging function of the researchers flourished, as they contributed to breaking down preconceptions and boundaries between the policymakers and the school staff. One teacher reflected on the group discussions:

> *I thought 'now I am sitting here with all those people with their difficult words'. But then you* [the researcher] *asked supplementing questions, so I could tell a bit more. And then I noticed that there were quite a lot of connections.*

The policymakers and the researchers had the power to foster this momentum of influence between the parties, but there was no follow-up meeting planned. The researchers served primarily as bridging actors who facilitated communication, while the visible, invisible, and hidden power remained with the ministries over the course of the research process.

Meaning of participation

In this project both schools had to define what participation would mean in their organisation. In general, the professional stakeholders within the schools were given *space* to participate by attending staff meetings. This (increasingly) empowered the personnel to share their voice and engage in change. Although *space* to develop expertise was already available in the schools, participation in this PAR process, with a focus on participatory governance within and outside of schools, created other associations with the meaning of participation.

The school professionals discussed the meaning of participation in relation to *the willingness* to participate; and whether they wanted to be change agents, and thus to co-govern. They were eager to give input and to discuss issues; however, some indicated that they lacked the *time* and the *expertise* to actively participate in the change-making process. Most of those who expressed this view did not participate. When they were asked about their participation in relation to (national) school policy, they were even more likely to say that they lacked the expertise to commit to participation. Participation was thus defined by the concepts of *freedom, space, and time to speak up;* but also by the concept of *expertise to speak up* (confidence). Interestingly, the lay stakeholders (parents, children/students, other personnel in the schools) were less reserved about participation. They framed their participation in the same way as the professional stakeholders, but they were less focused on their *expertise*. These participants were already organised in a student or parent committee, in which they were accustomed to speak up, which may explain their confidence.

At the time of the ministries invitation to participate, the schools discussed what they wanted share with the ministries, but not the meaning of actual participation in participatory governance. In the gatherings with the ministries, the school participants tended to identify themselves as 'a *participant in the meetings*', and not as a '*participant in a co-governance process*'. The educational professionals participated on the basis of their own expertise, but they did not acquire the role of co-governor.

The policymakers approached their participation as a process of interaction and discussion. For the policymakers, their participation was based on their expertise on education. But to achieve participation in co-governance in this research setting, the participants from the schools should have had expertise on policymaking processes. The lack of expertise influenced their roles as participants in the participatory governance process. Conversely, the policymakers believed that they had sufficient expertise on the educational practitioners' field to create policies for this field. In one of the monthly meetings at the ministry, the initiating policymakers reflected on this sense of confidence in relation to participation giving field stakeholders an active and role throughout the policymaking process: *'a sense of procedural security is lost, but it may uncover problems that are evident in the policy area'*.

It therefore appears that the definitions of participation were based on the participants' respective levels of expertise, whereby the policymakers felt more confident than the participants from the schools about their combined level of knowledge on policymaking and educational processes. The groups of participants thus differed in their intentions for participation.

The role of the researchers

The researchers discussed with the policymakers what participation and a participatory process would mean in terms of inclusion, power, and communication *at the schools*; but they did not discuss what participation would mean to the members of the ministry, other than sharing their expertise through the researchers. It thus appears that the meaning of participation was based on *sharing knowledge* and investing *time and space*, although *the space* for participation by the schools was limited to participation at the local, not at the national level. Upon reflection, the researchers should have been aware of these signals, and discerned the meaning of participation for the ministries at an earlier stage.

Discussion

The PAR process identified the institutional space within schools and showed the space for participatory governance between schools and the ministries. In reference to the Democracy Cube of Fung (2006) we observed the processes of participatory governance in the schools and between schools and the ministries.

Within schools

The institutional space for participatory governance in the schools grew during the PAR process. The staff gained confidence in addressing issues in the school: they co-governed in the process of exploring the challenges and thinking cooperatively about the change process within their schools, and they eventually executed their plans,

Thus in both schools there was growth on the line of authority and power of stakeholders and communication and decision-making processes. The stakeholders could negotiate solutions and share and deploy their expertise. The participants showed that their awareness of the meaning of participation and of the power structures could support them in creating more institutional space for exerting influence in their own schools. One challenge for the participants was to achieve this goal with continuous involvement of all parties. The existing literature relates change in schools to transformative school leadership, noting that transformational leaders work to create a shared vision and mutually agreed-upon goals, while providing appropriate support (Wood and Govender 2013). This is necessary for guiding a process of participatory governance within the schools too. The primary school already incorporated this transformative leadership style. For them it was easier to facilitate processes of participatory governance than for their counterparts in the secondary school.

Breaking boundaries between schools and ministries

While some of the stakeholders in the schools gained authority and power, they did not achieve authority and power on the policy level. Thus, the aim of breaking through hierarchical lines using PAR and creating participatory governance in a joint process with schools and policymakers was not achieved. The participants from the schools indicated that they were hesitant to show their technical expertise at the national policy level, because they believed they did not know 'how it worked at the policy level' and still saw themselves as visitors to the ministries' processes. The school staff appointed the researchers to serve as the bridging actors between the schools and the ministries, and to speak on their behalf. The researchers also aligned themselves with the ministries' policymakers, who stayed distant from PAR processes in the schools. This position originated in the intention to create governance space for the schools from the very start of the project. Although this was innovative practice for the ministries, in the course of this project it merged into the traditional position of commissioning research to external researchers, where researchers give updates on the research progress. Because the researchers served as spokespersons for both parties, they did not stimulate direct communication between the ministries and the schools. Thus, the institutional spaces at the ministries and between the ministries and the schools were not properly developed.

The reception of the results at the ministries was mixed. The ministries were aware of most of the topics and dilemmas schools were facing, such as high work load and the difficulties to serve the diversity of pupils in schools. This created the impression that PAR and participatory governance processes in schools did not generate new results, as the policymakers had hoped. When we, as researchers analysed this response we observed that the insights gained from the process were innovative in genre rather than content, although they were not recognised as such.

The results presented to the policymakers were of a different character than what the ministries were used to. The results on the PAR-*process*, in which the quality of education was analysed in terms of power relations, communication styles and the role of different stakeholders, were therefore perceived as less relevant or useful. . The changes in

authority, power, and co-governance were quite subtle, and the contextual results from the situational analysis were hard to translate into the discourse of the ministries. The answer to their question in all its details was broader and richer than in regular research too, inherently to an answer on a question formulated by others.

The reserved stand of the policymakers should be acknowledged as the innovative practice that it was. The research questions were not pre-determined by the ministries and the course of the project was sometimes bumpy, but the policymakers resisted their urge to intervene in the school's process to ensure the anticipated progress. The consequences proved to be challenging for the representatives of the policy department when the projects results did not meet the expectations and criteria for 'regular' research projects. Aside from the content and genre of the outcomes, the results could support the development of participatory governance in the future and improvements for the organization of the PAR-processes for the ministries.

In this paper, we highlighted the facilitation of participatory governance by means of a PAR project. The researcher's reflections show that attention should be paid to the level of institutional space for participatory governance in both the schools and the ministries.

Recently, Jordan and Kapoor (2016) argued that for PAR to create impact and change beyond the margins, it should be reframed a research approach in education into an approach with a wider purpose. This project has provided a partial response to this call for change. For the education professionals, the PAR process invigorated the awareness that they could share power and authority. Also, the PAR-process impacted on the relation between ideas for change emerging at local schools and national policy implementation. Unfortunately, the institutions as well as the researchers were not able to grasp the wider implications of PAR during the project, and to create continuous interaction processes at a larger scale and in their daily routines.

As Jordan and Kapoor (2016) pointed out, the distances between stakeholders are often too large to be bridged, because they are still constructed by the rules and power regulations of the wider society. This project shows that it is hard to combine the local and diverse context of the schools with the overarching policy themes and processes in the national policymaking process.

A positive impact of PAR as a means of working on participatory governance was that policymakers started to think more with the schools in mind. They became more aware of for whom they are designing their policies. But the project did not lead to a new type of relationship across the policy field. Previous research has shown that participatory research in which policymakers are involved tends to create more awareness, but that to carry this awareness into daily work is a process that requires time and effort – and a culture in which rules can be bent (Nyholm and Haveri 2009; Michels and De Graaf. 2017). We see this reflected in the policymakers' responses to the process. They indicated that they have learned how to deal with the role of bystander, as the ministries did not have a say in the selection of the topic of study and/or in the research process itself. Still, the traditional way of creating policies had the upper hand, and only little steps were made in incorporating the results of the schools studies in policy-development. We can therefore conclude that use of the PAR process alone was not sufficient to break through the rules and regulations within the ministries.

Because of the researchers bridging role, the ideas from schools were communicated indirectly to the policymakers. As a consequence, policymakers could withdraw more easily. If the schools had been more involved in how the government works and develops policies, the exchange might have been much more productive. It is also possible that more constructive communication and decision-making strategies could have contributed to a better process facilitation. However, all parties would have had to be dedicated to the process and committed to engaging in an inclusive discourse on participation (Nyholm and Haveri 2009).

Previous research describes researchers serving as bridging actors between the different parties in the participatory process as a positive outcome for the inquiry process (Tan and Atencio 2016). In our project however, we found that the bridging process made the goals of the PAR process more difficult to achieve, because important matters got lost in translation. To allow the school's influence to grow throughout the process of participatory governance, the parties should have interacted more directly and on more occasions throughout the project. Both parties indicated that they did not feel aware of the context of the other party and were not able to experience each other's reality. The bridging function of the researchers was a facilitation for both the education professionals as well as for the policymakers, but it discouraged the emergence of important advantages of PAR.

The goal of moving participatory governance within education from a local to a national level in the Netherlands, and of creating productive interlinkages, was initiated with this project. When policymakers make the effort to include voices from the public sphere in their policymaking processes, the meaning of participation and its effects on their work should be made explicit. Participatory research to facilitate participatory governance can add value for agenda setting aims, and to empower participants in this process. Policymakers and their managers therefore should have the courage to break through the rules, regulations and procedures at their ministries. They should find the space to look beyond the political discussions that may interfere with the discussions at the school level. The rationality of policymaking can still remain in place, despite the development of innovative ideas. Co-governance could create a basis for productively exploring these ideas.

Note

1. In the results, the representatives in this sounding board are referred to as 'the policymakers'.

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